Magdalena Bleinert

The Binary Rhetoric of Representation in Joseph Conrad's Under Western Eyes

If Modernist fiction has a trademark, it is the sense of epistemological bewilderment with which human consciousness responded to the rapid changes and developments that spread epidemically through every area of life around the turn of the last century. Although Conrad's novels remain within a set of clearly recognisable realist conventions, his attempts to render the condition of cognitive doubt place him together with other early Modernist writers, such as Henry James and Ford Madox Ford, who set out to explore epistemological uncertainty in fiction which has not yet adopted the procedures of extensive formal experimentation to be found in the later stages of Modernism. Like e.g. *The Ambassadors* or *The Good Soldier*, *Under Western Eyes* conveys a sense of cognitive perplexity through systematic deployment of binary oppositions, or, more precisely, through exploring the dynamic relations between juxtaposed concepts. It is Conrad's interest in such relations that has earned many of his protagonists the label of *homo duplex*: a name to which Razumov has perhaps a particularly good claim.

AUTOCRACY AND DEMOCRACY

The choice of St Petersburg and Geneva as background places *Under Western Eyes* in the context of the political debate engaged in by

Conrad in some of his novels,[1] and, most notably, in his essay on autocracy and war. The contrast between the two cities mirrors the clash between two opposing political systems, with Conrad's imagery reflecting his moral assessment of both. St Petersburg is as dark as the corruption that autocracy has inflicted upon its citizens: the events which take place there inevitably happen at night time, and the two colours which keep reappearing with striking regularity are grey (Prince K—'s whiskers), and brown (Haldin's coat). Autocracy has turned St Petersburg into a heart of darkness, cutting off its inhabitants from the life-giving light of freedom and hope, a concept spelt out by the metaphoric language in which the teacher foretells Natalia Haldin's future: "I saw the gigantic shadow of Russian life deepening around her like the darkness of an advancing night" (144).[2]

Autocracy is evil, but the revolutionaries' inchoate ideas of that which should replace it can hardly be construed as a satisfying alternative, amounting to little more than fanaticism (Haldin), naive idealism (Natalia), hypocritical feminism (Peter Ivanovitch), masochistic sacrifice (Tekla), greed (Madame S—), and finally, misjudgement (Sophia Antonovna). More emphatically, Conrad's scepticism about the soundness of the moral foundations for revolutionary activity is signalled already in the assassination scene: Haldin's "engine" kills a number of innocent passers-by crowding around de P—'s sleigh after the first bomb has missed its target. The ultimately undecidable nature of Haldin's act – at once a heroic deed and a barbarous murder – is projected onto the two political systems, destroying the logic of privileging democracy over autocracy. Razumov's tragedy is that he is caught between

[1] For a comprehensive study of Conrad's political novels, see E.K. Hay, *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Study* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1963).

[2] All textual references are to the most recent edition of the novel (*Under Western Eyes*, ed. P. Kirschner, 3rd ed. (London: Penguin, 1999)).

"the lawlessness of autocracy" and "the lawlessness of revolution" (57); unable to identify with either, he is left to face an epistemological hiatus which will ultimately destroy him.

If the revolutionaries' vague ideals of liberty can be seen as an embryonic form of democratic thought, it is Conrad's portrayal of Geneva that, along with the imagery used in the description of St Petersburg, carries the weight of his political debate on the two systems of government. The choice of Rousseau's birthplace as a counterpart of St Petersburg in the novel's double spatial setting places Russian autocracy in opposition to the West European tradition of liberal thought; a connection which is further emphasised when the statue of Rousseau appears in the picture.

Conrad's description of Geneva clearly reveals his reservations about Western democracy which has, in his own words, "elected to pin its faith to the supremacy of material interest:"[3] if the picture of St Petersburg is painted in very dark colours, its Western counterpart is only a shade paler. Presented as "the respectable and passionless abode of democratic liberty," Geneva is "the serious-minded town of dreary hotels, tendering the same indifferent hospitality to tourists of all nations and to international conspirators of every shade" (250); "the town indifferent and hospitable in its cold, almost scornful, toleration – a respectable town of refuge to which [others'] sorrows and hopes were nothing" (238); "the very desolation of slumbering respectability" (236). Conrad's emphasis on Geneva's bogus respectability and indifference reflects his disapproval of Western democracy and Rousseauian liberalism which he views as artificial and morally unsound. Rousseau's idea of man's innate goodness as grounds for self-justification and self-exculpation would have been unacceptable to a moralist like Con-

[3] J. Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters*, qtd. in Z. Najder, "Conrad and Rousseau: Concepts of Man and Society," *Joseph Conrad: A Commemoration*, ed. N. Sherry (London: Macmillan, 1976) 89.

rad, who believed – to put it crudely – that man's integrity depends on his rigid adherence to a set of unchanging values. The Geneva of *Under Western Eyes* is what Conrad saw as a result of moral relativism: an unnatural, spineless and shapeless growth detached from the living tissue of humanity, in which "respectability" becomes merely a function of indiscriminate, meaningless tolerance.

REASON AND EMOTION

The juxtaposition of St Petersburg and Geneva is linked to another set of oppositions – reason and emotion – which is perhaps the novel's most distinctive instance of exposing the manner in which binary logic fails to provide clear answers to epistemological questions. The opening sentence names the main character as "Cyril son of Isidor – Kirylo Sidorovitch – Razumov" (5), significantly deriving the surname from *razum*, the Russian for "reason," while the first name and the patronymic allude to the Cyrillic script, bringing together the rational tradition of European Enlightenment and the mystic ideals of the Old Slavonic Church. The symbolic marriage of the two opposing concepts united in Razumov's name anticipates the way in which the novel proceeds to demonstrate their interrelatedness and interdependence. Razumov turns out to be a student of philosophy, which confirms his image as an intellectual and a thinker, but reason, which is thus immediately brought into the picture, is counterbalanced with a vague impression created by the teacher's disclaimer that he could never "create for the reader the personality of . . . Razumov" (5); by his remarks on the incomprehensibility of the Russian character attributed to "the illogicality of their nature, the arbitrariness of their conclusions, the frequency of the exceptional" (5–6); and, finally, by his telling reflection on the "mysterious impulse of human nature" (6). Comments like these run counter to the impres-

sion made by Razumov's surname and status, implying the presence of something much less tangible than the logic of reason in the reality concretised and scrutinised in the novel.

As the narrative progresses, the conflict between reason and emotion emerges as a major cognitive dilemma which Razumov will struggle to resolve. His attempts to rationalise the moral choice forced upon him by Haldin's unsolicited confidence are undermined by an unspecified fear: "a suspicious uneasiness, such as we may experience when we enter an unlighted strange place – the irrational feeling that something may jump upon us in the dark – the absurd dread of the unseen" (27). The final recognition of a patriotic duty towards his motherland is finally tested by a hallucination, when Haldin's phantom – the nightmare that will haunt Razumov until he confesses – appears lying in the snow before him. Razumov's rational argument is thus proved fallacious: he has not accounted for the moral obligation towards trust and confidence, and consequently, he has failed to notice the bond that does exist between himself and Haldin "the fanatical idiot."

Razumov's momentary lapse of judgement is going to prove fatal: reason cannot exist independently of moral principles rooted in emotion, and, consequently, Haldin's "rapid spiral descent" into the "deep black shaft" mirrors Razumov's tailspin into guilt. Oblivious of the process his decision has triggered, Razumov does his best to accommodate the immediate consequences of his betrayal: he responds to Councillor Mikulin's summoning letter and agrees to become a spy, all the time continuing to seek support in reason: "I know I am but a reed. But I beg you to allow me the superiority of the thinking reed over the unthinking forces that are about to crush him out of existence" (65). It is unlikely that Razumov, a widely-read student of philosophy, has invoked Pascal unwittingly; his words can therefore only serve the ironic purpose of showing how wide off the mark his judgement has been. Pascal's recognition of the limitations of reason, and his rejection of

Cartesian rationalism on the grounds of its inapplicability in ethical problems, are in direct contradiction to Razumov's intended meaning. The superiority of Pascal's "thinking reed" consists in its moral principles, whereas Razumov has ignored them: in betraying Haldin, he has acted on immoral, purely selfish motives, and it becomes clear that in order to become a "thinking reed" he must confess. His love for Natalia Haldin, the feeling which he had once rejected with scorn, has turned out to be a necessity, although the confession – the one occasion when he puts emotion before reason – is an act of pyrrhic bravery: his newly-found commitment to truth does reinstate his independence but at the same time it ruins his life, finally sealing his alienation.

PHANTOMS AND REALITY

Razumov's struggle to reconcile reason with emotion mirrors his efforts to distinguish between the real and the unreal, or, as he calls it, phantoms and reality – another binary set on which his cognitive progression is hinged. Things which he perceives as real prior to the betrayal – the silver medal, academic career, and hard work, rewarded with respectability and distinction – are constructs of his pragmatic reason, and autocracy is similarly "real" because it provides the necessary foundations for his ambitions.

The appearance of Haldin's phantom shocks and irritates Razumov who, defending his view of reality, insists on its being unreasonable and unimportant: "To what is intelligible I can submit," he tells Mikulin in exasperation, "But I protest against this comedy of persecution. . . . A comedy of errors, phantoms, and suspicions" (72). This comfortable self-assurance ends in Geneva, where Razumov finds himself in a duplicitous world, in which things are *not* what they seem to be: Haldin, whom he has believed to be a criminal, turns out to be a worshipped hero; revolutionary

beliefs, which he dismissed as fanaticism, return as noble patriotism through Natalia Haldin's faith in her brother's ideals; the revolutionary leader Peter Ivanovitch professes the cult of women but does not hesitate to exploit them in pursuit of his selfish goals; the innocent drunk Ziemianitch is the culprit; and he himself, although a traitor and a spy, becomes almost a celebrity. Nothing could be further from the clear-cut vision of reality Razumov once had, and his bewilderment confirms the ultimate defeat of the cognitive apparatus he has relied on so far: "This was a comedy of errors. It was as if the devil himself were playing a game with all of them in turn" (201).

Conrad's epistemology in *Under Western Eyes* is thus focused explicitly on the question of distinguishing between the real and the unreal,[4] warning against crediting illusory appearances with validity. The novel questions the value of vision based on subjective perception, creating the grounds for Razumov's bewilderment and his final sense of having failed to account for his experience. Haldin's phantom is not an irrational product of Razumov's imagination because it stands for truth and moral values which

[4]In one of the more recent studies of Conrad's fiction, Martin Ray argues that the clash between the real and the unreal in *Under Western Eyes* is introduced to bring out the contrast between the "unreality" of the "world" depicted in the novel, and its "all too real tragedies:" M. Ray, *Joseph Conrad*, Modern Fiction Series (London: Edward Arnold, 1993) 95–96. His argument, however, is rather strained, as it is based on what Ray calls Conrad's recurrent use of theatrical images, such as e.g. Razumov's face "modelled vigorously in wax" (6), Mikulin's hair which looks like "a wig" (66), or the nameless student's nose which seems to be made of "painted cardboard" (53). Ray sees these phrases as evidence for Conrad's intention to use theatre as a binding metaphor, which seems to overstate the case. While the effect of unreality in the novel is undeniable, it seems to have been created mostly by Conrad's deliberate and straightforward use of defamiliarisation in presenting Razumov's perceptions, rather than the deployment of theatrical imagery. Most instances of the latter employ somewhat commonplace metaphors which are not consistently foregrounded.

are man's only certainty in an uncertain world, and the pragmatic, opportunistic, self-centred ideals he used to hold dear turn out to be the very phantoms he used to mock.

Razumov's discovery of the value of truth is not, however, synonymous with finding answers to the questions which his experience has made him ask. The ambiguous resolution of his predicament, running counter to the logic which rules that a converted sinner must be rewarded, is the novel's final indication of the unknowable nature of reality. For all Razumov has gained by his confession, he might have been drawn to follow yet another phantom: his ruin symbolises his cognitive failure, his deafness a metaphor for the limitations of knowledge based on perception. While he has certainly learnt to reject phantoms, he exits the narrative still without a dependable method for telling them from reality.

EAST AND WEST

The novel's main binarism, however, is the juxtaposition of the East and the West. Conrad's definition of the point of view as that of "Western eyes" already in the novel's title immediately evokes the concept of cultural polarisation, further introduced in the opening paragraphs where the English teacher refers to Razumov as a creation of an alien culture which it is not within his power to identify with or even comprehend. Throughout the entire narrative, the teacher keeps emphasising the inadequacy of his understanding of the story he narrates, describing himself as a representative of "us Europeans of the West" (79), "a mute witness of things Russian, unrolling their Eastern logic under my Western eyes" (267), or even "a dense Occidental" (82). Although his informed comments, or, as he calls them, "digressions," on Russian mentality – which for him is synonymous with the mentality of

the East – seem to belie this self-deprecating attitude, they nevertheless fail to reduce the distance separating him from the experience he narrates. His inability to enter the narrated consciousness results from a cultural gap of which he is aware, and which he tries to describe, but which he cannot bridge. Russian talk bewilders him, not because he cannot understand it, but because he cannot rationalise the mysticism it invokes. "Life is a thing of form," he asserts, "it has plastic shape and a definite intellectual aspect. The most idealistic conceptions of love and forbearance must be clothed in flesh, as it were, before they can be made understandable" (77). Russian mentality defies this rational, pragmatic, Western principle: it embraces abstract ideas and ideals – whether autocratic or revolutionary – thriving on the mystic language in which they are expressed.

Apart from his recurring admissions of the inability to understand, the teacher's failure to account for the incompatibility of the two cultures is also inscribed into his position in the narrative. A passive observer, he stands back and watches the drama unfolding before his myopic Western eyes, his non-participation reflecting his cognitive helplessness. Neither his involvement with the Haldin women nor his affection for Natalia can change his status of an outsider, and he remains on the peripheries of the novel's action until, in the climactic confession scene, he becomes invisible, blending into the background: "How did this old man come here?" (249), asks Razumov, who had not noticed that he was not alone with Natalia till the teacher has spoken to him. The scene confirms the distance between the teacher and things Russian, his reaction to Razumov's confession sounding strangely incongruous in its verbosity against the mute pain of Natalia's shock: "This is monstrous. What are you staying for? Don't let her catch sight of you again. Go away! . . . Don't you understand that your presence is intolerable – even to me? If there's any sense of shame in you . . ." (249). As Razumov disappears from

the house, the teacher's attention is drawn to the fact that he has snatched Natalia's veil; it is hard not to see it as Conrad's intention to allude to the exaggerated importance the Western mentality attaches to manners, or even to material property. Razumov's confession blows apart his own world, Natalia's, and her mother's; the teacher, before whose eyes three lives have just fallen apart, refuses to be stunned into the silent horror that dominates the scene.

Conrad's portrayal of the East and the West, then, is designed to bring out their ultimate incompatibility: on the one hand, the East – mystic, incomprehensible, unaccountable – will not yield to the pragmatic, logical Western mind; on the other, Western complacency and self-absorption can never penetrate the depths of a Russian soul. *Under Western Eyes* opens up, in a moment of cultural panic, the suggestion of the possibility of ontological difference. Russia is not just unknowable to the present narrator under present circumstances. It is always, and in its nature, unknowable: it is another world.

* * *

The cultural incompatibility, conveyed through the character of the teacher, is where Conrad's novel seems to depart from other early Modernist fiction, which is generally characterised by a tendency to refine realism by incorporating epistemological doubt into the very structure of novelistic discourse. In a way, *Under Western Eyes* serves as a counter-example to this development: while Conrad seems content with the distancing effect offered by this type of structure, he uses it in order to reinforce authorial opinion, rather than open the novel out to a politically risky epistemological self-questioning. Where other writers, such as James or Ford, employ an untrustworthy or unreliable narrator in order to mediate between the monologic voice of a single author and the

inescapable muddle of dialogic agents in their narratives, Conrad's case is peculiar in that he borrows the trappings of this convention, while leaving a monologic quasi-authorial attitude largely intact. This is to say that the figure of the nameless language teacher, despite being emotionally involved with several of the characters, too obviously acts as a mouthpiece for Conrad's unresolved bipartisan polemics. Our estimations of the merits or demerits of characters and their actions in *Under Western Eyes* are in no way troubled by a sense of the narrator's participation in the novel's events. While it is usual within this particular novelistic tradition for the reader to receive some notification of how the participant narrator has been changed by the events he recounted, it is surely significant that in *Under Western Eyes* we hear nothing of the effects which the events he has narrated might have had on him. This employment of a "blank" participant narrator would suggest that Conrad, for all his professed interest in the enigmatic, does not fully share the Modernist writers' concern with capturing the sense of fragmentation and cognitive perplexity experienced by the Modernist self. Instead, it would seem that he is exploiting a contemporary familiarity with fiction's epistemological complexities in order to render what is an essentially polemical text more convincing – more realistic.